

Dr John Cumming and Crown Court Church, London

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After the union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707 many Scots moved into England and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presbyterian churches were founded in several cities and towns, especially in the greater centres of population, London, Newcastle and Liverpool, and these congregations were gradually organised into presbyteries.¹

These churches regarded themselves as congregations of the Church of Scotland and petitions from the presbyteries were sent to the General Assembly asking that the English congregations and their presbyteries be organised as an English Synod of the Church of Scotland. The Assembly rejected these petitions and advised the English churches to organise themselves as an autonomous English Presbyterian Church. This process took place between 1836 and 1842 and brought into being the Presbyterian Church in England. The Scottish Church had rejected the overtures mainly on the ground that being an Established Church it did not wish to exercise discipline in the territory of a sister Establishment.

At this time, the Church of Scotland was itself being convulsed by an internal crisis over the issue of establishment and the exercise of patronage and this led in 1843 to the great Disruption which split the Church and led to the organizing of the Free Church of Scotland. The Presbyterian Church in England was almost unanimous in support of the Free Church. English Presbyterians resented the continuing disabilities they had to endure at the hands of the Church of England and they also viewed with distaste the Tractarian and Rationalist movements which they observed in the Church of England. All this stiffened their support for the Free Church.

However, there were those who wished to retain their links with the Church of Scotland, the Auld Kirk. In a few instances, such people happened to be the trustees of presbyterian churches and they were able to claim the buildings and assert that they were churches in connection with the Church of Scotland. For example, the trustees held Swallow Street Church in London for the Church of Scotland, but the great majority of the congregation departed and founded Marylebone Presbyterian Church.

By 1867, there were only nine church buildings in England registered as calling themselves churches linked to the Church of

¹ R. B. Knox, "The Relationship between English and Scottish Presbyterianism, 1836-76", *RSCHS*, xxi, pt. 1, 43-45, with appended references.

Scotland. Only one of these had a large and lively congregation; it was Crown Court Church in London.² The minister was John Cumming, an Aberdonian born in the parish of Fintray in 1807. He went to school and university in Aberdeen and graduated in 1827 and proceeded to study divinity under Professor Duncan Mearns who reinforced Cumming's early convictions in favour of the establishment of the Church of Scotland. Mearns recognised the abilities of his student and also paid him the debatable compliment that he spoke English "with a degree of propriety seldom exhibited by natives of the northern part of the island".³ He was licensed by the Presbytery of Aberdeen in May 1832. He secured a summer employment as a tutor with a family in London and he was suddenly called upon to conduct a service in Crown Court Church which was without a minister. On the strength of his conduct of the service the congregation began to think of giving him a call to be their minister. Letters of commendation were received from seven Aberdeen professors, including Mearns. A unanimous call was presented to Cumming and he was ordained by the London Presbytery on 27 September 1832. Thus began a ministry which was to last for nearly 50 years. In 1833, he married Elizabeth Nicolson, the daughter of one of the elders of the church. Her brother became a clergyman in the Church of England.⁴

Crown Court Church was at that time in a sorry state. In 1830, there had even been a suggestion that the church should be closed and the congregation find a home in "some respectable denomination".⁵ Cumming thus entered into an unpromising field. James Hamilton, who was later to become the minister of Regent Square Presbyterian Church, was at that time a university student in Glasgow and during a visit to London he attended a service in Crown Court and heard Cumming preach; he noted that the church was "half full, plain people and a plain church"; the people seemed listless and, said Hamilton, "altogether I fear that Presbyterianism does not thrive in London; I question how far it is worthwhile to struggle for its lifeless existence". Little did he think that within 15 years he would have gathered a congregation of over 600 members in Regent Square, and he certainly did not see that

² *Weekly Review* (hereafter *WR*), 1867, 635.

³ *In Memoriam: The Rev. John Cumming* (an anonymous work printed for private distribution), 6. For Mearns, see *DNB* and Hew Scott, *Faith*, iii, pt. ii, 616, 898.

⁴ *In Memoriam: The Rev. John Cumming*, 6. There is a mural tablet in memory of her father in Crown Court Church. Her brother, Prebendary Nicolson, took part in Cumming's funeral.

⁵ Crown Court Session Records, 30/11/1830.

within far fewer years Cumming would have become a celebrated London preacher.⁶

Cumming had a magnetism which soon drew crowds to hear his clear and impassioned sermons. The congregation began to take heart and the building was redecorated in 1834, but the crowds soon outgrew the capacity of the building and extensive repairs costing £1,500 were undertaken in 1841. Four direction boards pointing the way to the church were purchased. A young licentiate, Marshall Lang, whose son was to become Archbishop of Canterbury, came to assist Cumming for six months and he recalled that often as many people had to be turned away as were able to get into the building.⁷ A major rebuilding and expansion of the building was embarked upon in 1847 and for almost three months the services were held in Exeter Hall which was filled with 4,000 people, and the police were paid £1 to control the crowds as they left the hall. Cumming himself gave £250 to provide four new windows in the church. The renovated building held over 1,000 people and the pew rents rose to £1,500 a year. Cumming had been called on the basis that the weekly offerings would go to maintain the building and cover expenses, and the pew rents would go to the minister. At the start, this provided Cumming with the small income of £100 a year and by the end of his seventh year had not risen above £200. In the days of his fame he could have claimed the full £1,500 of rents but he rarely took more than £900; there was one quarter when he got £260.⁸ By 1862, he claimed he was giving pastoral care to 1,000 communicant members. The average attendance at communion rose to over 500.⁹

During the services in Crown Court the waiting carriages filled the streets in the area around Covent Garden and the congregation must have included many who were neither Scots nor members of the church but whom the Session records call "Christian strangers". This influx of strangers played havoc with the system of pew-rents. Seats were rented and had to be kept empty until the last moment in case the holders wished to occupy them. The position of pew-opener was therefore a delicate office, particularly when crowds of strangers were pressing for admission. One pew-opener, a Mr Franklin, had to be dismissed due to complaints about his officious bearing from both seat holders and visitors;

⁶ W. Arnot, *The Life of James Hamilton*, 113; R. B. Knox, "James Hamilton and English Presbyterianism", *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, ii, no. 9, 286-307. Cumming was present at Hamilton's funeral, *WR*, 1867, 1121.

⁷ Lady Frances Balfour, *Ne Obliviscaris* (1930), i, 176; Session Records, 16/7/1834.

⁸ *In Memoriam*, 11, 40.

⁹ *WR*, 1862, 436; Cumming, *Original Discourses* (1844) (hereafter *OD*).

when one of the elders gave him the notice of dismissal he was said to have shown "an unhappy temper".¹⁰

Cumming's fame drew not a few of the Scottish nobility who in Scotland were often attached to the Episcopal Church and their interest also brought some of the English aristocracy to the church. Cumming enlisted their support for his schemes to help the poor, and especially the children, of the area. Their patronage helped him to build and maintain three schools, one for boys, one for girls and one for infants, where 600 could be given a rudimentary education and during the 30 years from 1849 to the end of his active ministry it was estimated that over 16,000 had passed through the schools. One of his leading supporters was the Duchess of Sutherland. She was a daughter of the Earl of Carlisle and a granddaughter of the Duke of Devonshire and her palatial London home, Stafford House, became the focus of many philanthropic causes.¹¹ She was attracted by Cumming's work for the poor and she attended prize days and organised bazaars in aid of the schools. At the prize day in 1867 she was accompanied by the Duchess of Abercorn. The Duchess of Beaufort, a niece of the Duke of Wellington, was also a steady supporter and Cumming dedicated to her a volume of his sermons. A sister-in-law of the Duchess of Sutherland became the Duchess of Norfolk and it was probably this connection which brought Cumming into contact with the Duke of Norfolk who had defected from the Church of Rome and was strongly opposed to the establishment of a Roman Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850.¹² Cumming also opposed this move and the Duke was among those who paid tribute to his presentation of the case for the opposition. The Duke and Duchess attended services in Crown Court and were said to have shared a pew with the Duchess of Wellington.¹³

The Duchess of Sutherland's son was a friend of the Prince of Wales. He married a Mackenzie of Cromartie and Cumming baptised their daughter in their London home and the Prince and Princess of Wales were present at the baptism.¹⁴ One of the

¹⁰ Session Records, January 1841.

¹¹ See *DNB* for article on the Duchess (Harriet Leveson-Gower), also Ronald Gower, *Reminiscences* (1883), i, ch. i.

¹² G. Brenan & E. P. Statham, *The House of Howard* (1907), ii, 642-52: this work regards the Duke as sadly wanting in dignity and constancy and treats his contact with Protestantism as a wrong-headed aberration for which he made amends by a death-bed return to the fold. The recent quinqucentenary volume, *The Dukes of Norfolk* (1982), by J. M. Robinson, says that the Duke was a man of aristocratic conservatism who disliked the strident manner of Wiseman and defected from the Church of Rome but never formally renounced his faith to which he returned at the end: pp. 201-3.

¹³ *In Memoriam*, 60.

¹⁴ *WR*, 1866.

Duchess's daughters married the Duke of Argyll and Cumming baptised their two sons.¹⁵

The United Presbyterian magazine reported in 1859 that in the season three dukes and many lesser aristocrats could be found in the pews of Crown Court.¹⁶ The Earl of Aberdeen was a regular attender, as was his brother, Admiral Gordon, who kept his hat on until the service began and thus proclaimed that he only showed reverence to the Word of God and not to the building. The Duke and Duchess of Abercorn, though Anglicans when resident in Ireland, were regular attenders at Crown Court when in London. Their son, Lord Frederick Hamilton, a future diplomat, recalled how as a child he was taken to the church and had listened to Cumming; the church was crammed at every service and people stood to pray and sat to sing. Cumming aimed to raise the standard of singing. In 1834, the Session approved the payment of £20 a year to John Peat, "a person of respectability with a good voice and a competent acquaintance with music", to be the singing clerk. Some other singers were appointed to form a choir; each was paid £10 a year and Cumming himself paid part of these fees.¹⁷ Hamilton recalled that an anthem was sung by the choir and that during the singing some people would leave their pews and walk up and down the aisles, but he was not sure whether this was done as a protest against the innovation or as a chance to stretch their legs before the sermon which was sometimes 90 minutes and never less than 60 minutes long. Hamilton said that even as a small child he looked forward to the sermons which were a closely reasoned argument, and if hearers accepted the first premises the sermon moved logically to the final convincing conclusion. Hamilton said he got the same satisfaction from Cumming's sermons as he later got at school from the propositions of Euclid.¹⁸

Cumming was an assiduous visitor among the people who attended his church. Hamilton recalled how Cumming visited his home and got into discussion with the Duchess about bee-keeping on which he was an expert and on which he had published a book which was regarded as an authoritative treatment of the subject. On this visit he had four of a new breed of queen-bees and he had them in little paper bags. After showing them to the Duchess he returned them to the tail pocket of his clerical frock-coat and turned to another topic of discussion during which he leant against the mantelpiece, forgetting the bees in his pocket; they made their protest by stinging him through the cloth whereupon the earnest

¹⁵ *In Memoriam*, 60.

¹⁶ *UP Magazine*, Oct., 1859, 442. *WR*, 1862, 172; 1875, 513; 1867, 647.

¹⁷ Session Records, 6/3/1834.

¹⁸ Lord Frederick Hamilton, *The Vanished World of Yesterday* (book I, "The Days before Yesterday") (1950), 43-46.

pastor was transformed into a prancing presbyter at the sight of which young Hamilton rolled on the floor with laughter.¹⁹

During Cumming's early years in London the turmoil which led to the Disruption was in full spate and he became a well-known defender of the establishment principle. He addressed a public meeting in 1837 and his address was published in Fraser's Magazine and it was commended by Archbishop Howley of Canterbury and Bishop Blomfield of London. In 1840 a pamphlet appeared, entitled *A Short Statement of the Origin and Nature of the Present Divisions in the Church of Scotland* and it was believed to be the work of Cumming and it was certainly along the lines of argument which he used in his speeches at the time. It dealt with the Auchterarder and Marnoch cases and held that right was on the side of the Established Church.²⁰ On the eve of the Disruption he published an open letter to the Marquis of Cholmondeley to explain to the people of England the case for the Church of Scotland. He held that patronage had been part of the Scottish ecclesiastical framework from 1567 when the Scottish parliament had declared "that examination and admission of ministers within these realms lie only in the power of the Kirk, the presentations reserved to the just and ancient patrons". In 1592, parliament had again declared that presbyteries were bound to admit qualified presentees to the parishes. Therefore, the Patronage Act of 1712 was not a novelty but the reaffirmation of an ancient practice.²¹ Moreover, the rights of the Church were well protected; patrons could only present persons already licensed by the presbyteries of the Church as eligible to receive a call.²² The Veto Act which the General Assembly had dared to pass gave the right of rejection to the majority of communicant male heads of houses and this was not a renewal of any ancient practice but a novelty.²³ Cumming also felt that the campaign had been marked by a deplorable rancour, and many faithful ministers had been treated as though they were not Christians at all.²⁴ He also thought that when the crunch came and ministers realized that deprivation would follow disruption they would retreat. Cumming claimed that Candlish was an expert in devising expedients and detecting loopholes and he would find a pretext for remaining in the Church and continuing to erode its traditions from within.²⁵ This was certainly a gross misjudgment of the resolve of Chalmers and Candlish and their

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Fraser's Magazine*, xv, April 1837, 429-431; the 1840 Tract is attributed to Cumming in the Cambridge University Library (see 17ff.).

²¹ J. Cumming, *The Present State of the Church of Scotland* (1843), 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

followers. To his credit, Cumming was later to pay tribute to Chalmers whom he called "so great a man and so good a minister".²⁶ Cumming's stand was honoured by the University of Edinburgh which made him a doctor of Divinity in 1844.

Cumming spoke for only a small minority of English Presbyterians but as minister of Crown Court Church he was the natural leader of that minority. His congregation supported him and only one elder, Thomas Johnston, resigned because of sympathy with the Free Church cause. Cumming set himself to form the small group of churches which followed his lead into a synod claiming to be in connection with the Church of Scotland. It was his aim to have this synod recognized as a synod within the Church of Scotland, but just as the General Assembly in 1839 had rejected a petition from English Presbyterians to set up an English synod so also after 1843 did it reject Cumming's plea and it was not until 1934 that an English Presbytery was given a full place in the structure of the Church of Scotland.²⁷ Cumming's group could therefore do no more than constitute themselves as a synod related to the Church of Scotland and call themselves Scotch National Churches. Cumming also insisted that his synod would only ordain men who were already licentiates of the Church of Scotland; he would thus prevent the recruiting of ministers from English sources and thus avoid any suggestion of being in competition with the Church of England.²⁸ For example, in 1862 two ministers came from Scotland; James Muir of Irvine came as a licentiate and was ordained at Hexham; Robert Thomson had already been ordained by his presbytery of Dunfermline before coming to Newcastle.²⁹

The Presbyterian Church in England looked upon Cumming's synod with mingled pity and contempt. William Chalmers of Marylebone Presbyterian Church dismissed Cumming and his followers as a group with no defensible claim to be connected with the Church of Scotland, and in any case for Chalmers the true Church of Scotland was the Free Church.³⁰ Relations were aggravated when on legal grounds the Cumming group was able to claim buildings for the Church of Scotland and to expel congregations loyal to the Presbyterian Church in England. The *Weekly Review* bitterly derided Cumming and his Synod and referred to him as the Scot around whom the synod moved like "one constellation bright" but whose churches twinkled dimly in the back alleys and out of the way corners of London and were a

²⁶ *In Memoriam*, 27.

²⁷ G. G. Cameron, *The Scots Kirk in London* (1979), 204. Also *Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland*, ed. J. T. Cox & D. F. M. Macdonald, (6th edn., 1976), 303.

²⁸ *WR*, 1862, 436.

²⁹ *WR*, 1863, 140-41.

³⁰ *WR*, 1864, 342.

“pendicle of the Scottish Established Church”, though in fact “he and the minor tapers by which he is surrounded” had no constitutional links with the Church of Scotland.³¹ Donald Fraser, who succeeded Chalmers in Marylebone in 1870, took a more conciliatory line. Fraser had been a leader in bringing about a union of various strands of presbyterianism in Canada and when he became minister of the Free High Kirk in Inverness in 1859 he held that the aim should be to heal the Disruption and he was depressed by the bitterness in the Free Church against any signs of renewal in the Church of Scotland. His move into England brought him into the movement for union between the Presbyterian Church in England and the United Presbyterian Churches in England, but he held that the aim should be to include all presbyterians, including the Cumming synod, and he went to a meeting of that synod and was warmly received by some members but Cumming was “drily courteous” and swayed the synod against Fraser’s overtures. Fraser thought it curious that Cumming, who had neither received ordination in Scotland nor ministered in Scotland, should be so averse to a presbyterian union in England which could have stimulated “that reconciliation of the Scottish Churches which alone can give us in the future a worthy Church of Scotland”. The Synod of the Presbyterian Church in England ventured to invite Cumming to dine with the synod; it would have been too much to expect him to attend a sederunt of the synod, but there was some satisfaction that, though declining the invitation to dine, he had given the courteous reason that he would be out of London at the time.³²

Neither ridicule in England nor discouragement from Scotland caused Cumming to abandon his hopes for the integration of the synod into the Church of Scotland, but none of his overtures could lure the General Assembly to respond to his plea. When Principal John Tulloch of St Andrews was in London in 1862 at the time of the synod he kept aloof from any sederunt of the synod but he was persuaded to preach in Crown Court on the following Sunday and he also attended the synod dinner where he said he was welcomed with fulsome compliments and he hoped his reply had been accepted by Cumming as “a sufficient appreciation of his distinguished qualities”.³³ The synod appointed Cumming to go to the General Assembly in 1863 and, if invited to speak, to present the case for integration. He was prevented from attending by a rare bout of illness and his place was taken by Rev. Lawrence Macbeth of Halkin Street Church in London, a colleague who was later to give Cumming much trouble. Macbeth was allowed to speak and he

³¹ *WR*, 1862, 419, 436; 1863, 98.

³² R. B. Knox, “The Relationship between English and Scottish Presbyterianism”, *RSCHS*, xxi, pt. 1, 52; Donald Fraser, *Autobiography* (1892), 45, 57-58.

³³ Mrs Oliphant, *A Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch* (1888), 154.

raised the issue but all he could get from the Assembly was a promise to maintain "the bond of affection". Cumming went to the Assembly in 1865 but secured no increased commitment.³⁴ Appeals were also sent to the Assembly asking for financial help and pleading that Scots coming to England should be encouraged to seek out the churches which kept the ties with the Church of Scotland. The Assembly remained aloof from all appeals for closer union. In 1878, Dr Phin of Galashiels told the Assembly that while they had an interest in the synod in England there was no question of incorporating it into the Church of Scotland.³⁵ A further plea was sent to the Assembly in 1879; it said there were 16 churches in the synod; two were about to close, leaving 14, and of these Crown Court was the only London church in a fair state; eight outside London were doing fairly well but without help from Scotland more would die. Dr Phin secured the appointment of a committee to see what help could be given but he again stressed that the Church of England was the national Church and the most the Church of Scotland could contemplate was the giving of some help to provide services for those Scots who had conscientious objections to joining the Church of England, and he obviously hoped the number of these would be small.³⁶

Not all members of the synod shared Cumming's persevering zeal in this quest. Some of them felt there was a case for joining the Presbyterian Church in England which was predominantly Scottish in its membership and which became a larger and still strongly Scottish Church by its union in 1876 with the United Presbyterian churches to form the Presbyterian Church of England. Cumming was unmoved by any such tendency. He also made journeys to preach in Scotland. He was the guest of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland at Dunrobin Castle in 1862 when he preached at Golspie Parish Church and again in 1866 when he preached at Dornoch Cathedral in the presence of the Prince and Princess of Wales.³⁷ It gave him special satisfaction to be asked by the Queen in 1876 to preach at Balmoral, and he saw this as a royal imprimatur which rebuked the coldness of the Church of Scotland.³⁸

One of the most troublesome incidents in Cumming's management of the synod arose around Lawrence Macbeth, minister since 1851 of Halkin Street Church which had a special concern for missionary work among the Jews. In 1865, rumours began to circulate that Macbeth had managed to get the church property into his own name and was proposing to sell it to a noted

³⁴ *WR*, 1863, 140-1; 1865, Supplement, p. iv.

³⁵ *WR*, 1878, 497, 542.

³⁶ *WR*, 1879, 547.

³⁷ *WR*, 1862, 377; Cumming, *The Time is Short*, A sermon preached in Dornoch Cathedral, 30 September 1866.

³⁸ *WR*, 1876, 295.

Puseyite, the Hon. and Rev. Robert Liddell of St Paul's, Knightsbridge; another rumour was that he had sold it to a London merchant for £3,700, and still another that the English Presbyterian Church in Chelsea had offered £3,700 for it. The congregation was stunned when it was announced on the second Sunday in 1866 that no further Scotch services would be held in the church and that seatholders should remove their books, cushions and other personal belongings forthwith.³⁹

Cumming responded by announcing that a weekly service for the dispersed congregation would commence on the following Sunday when he would be the preacher.⁴⁰ The London Presbytery of the Scotch synod met in Crown Court to review the situation. Halkin Street Church had been rented from the Church of England to be a centre of mission to the Jews; the agreed rent was £160 a year. Macbeth had then bought the building for £2,100 and had relet it to the congregation for £80 a year. His health had now broken down and he wanted to sell the building. He said he would accept £4,000 from the Church of Scotland if that could be offered by 7 February.⁴¹ Macbeth denied that he had ever thought of selling it to the Tractarians and he threatened to take to court any who repeated the suggestion. Dr Phin was present as an interested observer and he again stressed that the Church of Scotland would not intervene in English affairs, though, if there were serious accusations against Macbeth, it might be possible to have him brought before the presbytery in Scotland by which he had been ordained and by whom, if thought right, he could be censured. This, it will be recalled, was how the case of Edward Irving had been conducted; the aftermath of that affair did not encourage another similar case.

Cumming thought it strange that a man who had been pleading ill-health should now be threatening a lawsuit but he said the fact would have to be faced that Macbeth had the power to dispose of the building and was determined to do so. When Cumming had written to him asking him to stay his hand, their fourteen-year friendship had not restrained Macbeth from replying in "the most ferocious letter I have ever received in my life". Macbeth had the power to sell and there was no possibility of raising £4,000 without help from the Church of Scotland. Phin intervened to say that there were wealthy Scots in London who could give £4,000 and thus obviate any appeal to Scotland where the Church was making herculean efforts to endow its own parishes. Cumming and three members of the presbytery were appointed to see if the deadline could be put forward but this was a heartless approach and the

³⁹ *WR*, 1866, 62: Liddell was the fifth son of the first Lord Ravensworth, and a cousin of Dean Liddell of Liddell and Scott fame.

⁴⁰ *WR*, 1866, 92.

⁴¹ *WR*, 1866, 175.

building was sold to the English Presbyterian congregation in Chelsea and was renamed Belgrave Presbyterian Church.⁴²

The matter was raised when the Cumming synod met later in the year and there were suggestions that Macbeth's conduct should be reported to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, but the prevailing view was that, deplorable as his conduct had been, he was now under "the hand of affliction". Cumming said he had worked for twelve years as a colleague of Macbeth and had thought they had a common aim but he had been surprised and distressed by the way things had turned out. Cumming referred to the matter in a speech to the General Assembly in 1866 but Phin closed the matter by saying the lesson of the episode was that the churches in England should see that their properties were legally so held as to be inalienable.⁴³

It will have been noted that in the plea sent to the General Assembly in 1879 Crown Court was said to be in "a fair state". This was not the description of a flourishing church. It was no longer on the crest of the wave. The crowds had ebbed. Cumming's great days were over; age and shortsightedness and the increasing eccentricities of his preaching had blurred much of his magnetism and the crowds had departed. In 1879 he retired.⁴⁴

He had been involved in all aspects of Scottish life in London. He was a chaplain to the Caledonian asylum and he took part in the annual meeting in 1862 when another Scot, Bishop Tait of London, addressed the children.⁴⁵ He attended to many Scots who fell ill with cholera in the outbreak of 1866; he was often sent for to minister to the dying and he went without fear. He seemed to have an immunity against infection and he said he had never had a headache in his life. His wide sympathies made him sensitive to the plight of the cotton workers in Lancashire when their trade was hit by the effects of the American Civil War; in response to his appeal the people of Crown Court gave £506 to the relief fund.⁴⁶

His influence was also spread through his many publications. They were mainly based on his sermons and lectures and he used the same material again and again but his works were presented with zest and flamboyance and had a wide sale. Several of his publications ran to three and four editions. He was also a serious student and he produced editions of such copious works as Willet's *Synopsis Papismi* in 24 volumes and a three-volume edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

Cumming had a lofty view of the ministry. The minister was called by Christ himself and he holds "the shepherd's crook, but

⁴² *WR*, 1866, 388.

⁴³ *WR*, 1866, 701. Macbeth died within a year: *WR*, 1867, 500.

⁴⁴ *WR*, 1879, 951-2.

⁴⁵ *WR*, 1862, 107.

⁴⁶ *WR*, 1862, 523.

not the monarch's sceptre". There had always been the temptation to inflate the extent of ministerial power. Cumming thought a minister was going too far if he said "I absolve you", even in the sense "I declare you to be absolved"; it was Christ alone who knew the genuineness of the penitence and could truly say "I absolve you". The further inflation in the claim of the papacy to have prophetic, priestly and regal rights was an infringement of the authority of Christ. On the other hand, ministers were more than the creatures of the congregation or of patrons: Neither patrons nor people were infallible.⁴⁷ Establishment by the state showed a proper national intention to foster all that made for righteousness. Ministers in an established Church were in a position to influence society. He rejected the accusation that clergy in England and Scotland were too highly paid and were thus unduly removed from their people's trials. He calculated that if all clerical revenues were equally shared the average annual income in England would be £190 and in Scotland, surprisingly, £225. The lower English level was probably due to the multiplicity of penurious curates. Cumming held that neither average was excessively high; dissenting ministers were on an even lower level. He admitted and defended the inequality of clerical stipends; a minister with a high stipend could be a witness to society that it was possible to be wealthy without being ruined in soul. If ministers could not prove that wealth could be wisely used, what hope was there for wealthy hearers less versed in Gospel principles?⁴⁸ He was, however, not unaware of the dangers involved in establishment and in favours from the powers that be:

After Constantine had raised a Church to power, her ministers to be princes, I question whether she was not exposed to a more terrible ordeal than when she was a sufferer in the martyrs' fires and in the dens of the earth.⁴⁹

The Church put on the livery of Caesar.⁵⁰

He did not see the Church of Scotland in any such peril and he had little sympathy with the agitation which led to the Disruption. He was happy to defend the order of the Church of Scotland. He held that in the scriptural polity of the early Church there was a parity and succession of presbyters and this had been continued throughout the centuries even when overlaid by episcopal and papal accretions. In course of time, some presbyters rose to pre-eminence for reasons of personal ability or the central situation of their church, but there still remained one ministry. Cumming was

⁴⁷ Cumming, *The Communion Table* (1852) (hereafter CT), 427-8, 431.

⁴⁸ Cumming, *Is Christianity from God?* (A Manual of Christian Evidence, 1848), 250-2.

⁴⁹ Cumming, *Expository Readings in the Book of Revelation* (1853) (hereafter BR), 212.

⁵⁰ Cumming, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1848) hereafter LEF), 109. See also Cumming, *The Age we live in* (Y.M.C.A. Lectures, 1847-8), 319.

content to allow the Archbishop of Canterbury to retain “all his titles and dignities as a temporal baron” but ecclesiastically and spiritually he was Cumming’s co-presbyter. Such ecclesiastical authority as higher figures in the hierarchy possessed was given to them by delegation from their co-presbyters, and such delegation could be justified “by the necessity and expediency of the case”.⁵¹

Cumming was thus eager to defend the continuity of the ministry through the order of presbyters and in this way he felt able to claim parity with the Church of England. However, as so many Protestant apologists were to discover, this argument had its difficulties, because the spirit of Christ was not always to be seen most clearly when the succession of clergy seemed to be the surest. He was impressed by the succession of great bishops in many sees and by the firm way in which a sequence of councils had defined the Church’s doctrine and practice and yet he was also at times convinced that a far more effective witness to the Gospel had been given by the persecuted minorities of Waldenses and Hussites, and by the dissenting figures such as Wycliffe, Bunyan, Baxter, Whitefield, Wesley and Watts and by missionary pioneers such as Carey whose names were in no hierarchical list.⁵²

Nevertheless, he had a high regard for the Church of England; it was “a noble and apostolic Church”, and Cumming saw his own rôle in England as that of a guest in the territory of another Church; he was a Scottish national and not an English nonconformist. When the English nonconformists in 1862 marked the bicentenary of the Ejection in 1662 Cumming took a muted line; he admitted the constancy of those who had taken a stand against too stringent laws but he did not want the revived memories to exacerbate the remaining tensions with the Church of England which, notwithstanding Tractarian novelties, was a Church to be held in great esteem.⁵³

His sense of debt to the past made him eager to draw upon the traditional forms of worship and to use responsive prayers. He had no sympathy with the view common in Scotland that there could be no proper worship if there was a prayer-book and an organ.⁵⁴ There is no evidence that he was in the circle of pioneering innovators led by Robert Lee of Greyfriars, Edinburgh. It was on his own responsibility that he published an edition of John Knox’s *Book of Common Order*; his revisions were slight and did not alter the general shape and content of the book. In his introduction, he said that in the early years of reform around 1560 there were ministers who used the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of

⁵¹ *The Liturgy of the Church of Scotland, or John Knox’s Book of Common Order*, ed. by Cumming (1840), Introduction, x-xi.

⁵² *LEF*, 152-7.

⁵³ *WR*, 1862, 299; *OD*, i, 75.

⁵⁴ Cumming, *Millennial Rest, or the World as it will be* (1862) (hereafter *MR*), 208.

England, and then in 1564 the General Assembly adopted Knox's Liturgy which was referred to in the *First Book of Discipline* as "our Book of Common Order". This pattern was then upset by two extreme trends in the seventeenth century. There was Laud's attempt in 1637 to impose the book which, said Cumming, was "an approximation to the Missal of the Roman Catholic Church".⁵⁵ This had aroused a hurricane of protest which led to a great baldness of worship, greater even than that contemplated in the Westminster Assembly's *Directory of Public Worship* which approved the use of both the Lord's Prayer and the Creed.⁵⁶ This harsh hostility to a liturgy had arisen in the rough times of the Covenant which had produced acts of heroism, but Cumming felt that when a longer view became possible the times of the Reformation rather than the days of the Covenant would stand out as "the meridian glory of the Scottish Church".⁵⁷ Laud's book, according to Cumming, had incurred intense resistance because it was seen as a foreign imposition, but it had also the internal weakness of leaving no place for extemporaneous prayer. Yet, whatever the weight of the arguments about the past, there was need for greater fulness and catholicity in the Church's worship. It was too much to expect every clergyman on every Sunday to lift the people to devotional heights; "there is a mediocrity among clergy as among laity". Normally, clergy need to have aids in the leading of worship. Cumming held that though Scottish usage was not tied to a particular form of worship it had lapsed into a barren state which was not the intention of the Reformers. The adoption of a liturgical form would not indicate a drift to episcopacy. Apart from the need for an ampler form of worship, there was also need for greater reverence and dignity in behaviour during the service. The habit of keeping on their hats until the service began was common among men and had arisen to emphasize the respect due to the Word and not to the building; this may have been necessary as a protest against pre-Reformation abuses but few Scots were now in danger of showing undue respect to their buildings.⁵⁸ It would also be an improvement if people were to stand to sing the divine praises: sitting was not prescribed in scripture wherein it was stated that the hosts of heaven stand before the throne. Kneeling was the scriptural prescription for praying and its adoption would reduce some of the prejudices of episcopalians who used Scottish peculiarities as a pretext for treating the Scottish Church with disdain.⁵⁹ As for the thorny subject of instrumental music, Cumming reaffirmed that he could find no prohibition in the

⁵⁵ The Liturgy of the Church of Scotland, Intro., v.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xxii-iv.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xvii; *MR*, 208.

constitution of the Church or in the acts of the General Assembly. Churches with excellent choirs, such as St George's and St Stephen's in Edinburgh could do without instrumental aid, but other churches were prone to get flatter with each verse. There was need of some accompaniment and if an organ was beyond the bounds of practicability a cello would be a help: "Why should the devil in the theatre and the archbishop in the Mass-House have all the good music?".⁶⁰ However, ready as he was to use aids to devotion, he was still awake to the seductions of lavish ceremonial: "We are not to use God's truth to improve our music, but we are to use our noblest music to unfold the attributes and make more vivid and glorious the grandeur and excellency of God's truth".⁶¹ Cumming also prepared a collection of hymns for use in Crown Court Church and this was commended in the Synod of Aberdeen by the influential Dr Bisset who praised Cumming's choice of hymns and called Cumming "our excellent co-adjutor".⁶²

At the centre of Cumming's preaching and teaching was a firm adherence to the traditional framework of Christian belief but he was very much aware of the contemporary trends which challenged so much of that tradition. He proclaimed the reality of God who was the Creator of the world and "I cannot conceive a rational being with one ounce of common sense to come to the conclusion that there is not a God who made and governs this present world".⁶³ God was not combined in a pantheistic union with his creation but remained distinct from his creation and was in control of what happened in this world; all people and events were within his overall control: "There is not a soldier upon eastern plains that has not a mission, and as soon as his sword has executed God's behest he will be removed from the field of conflict below"; "every bullet has its billet":

It is neither the Autocrat nor the Sultan nor chance that writes the name upon the bullet; it is our Father who is in heaven. There are no accidents on earth; all history is consequently fulfilling all prophecy.

Yet in all the process, God's purpose is to neutralize, forgive and overrule the evil, even the excesses of "a Pilate, a Napoleon, a revolution in Paris, an insurrection in Ireland, or a Chartist's insane pike-flourish in the streets in London".⁶⁴ On the other hand, it was by the will of God that England's affairs had been prospered under the skill of Wellington in the field and under the great Pitt in Parliament, and "by her who now wields the sceptre of this mighty

⁶⁰ *The Liturgy of the Church of Scotland*, Intro., xvii-xviii.

⁶¹ *CT*, 169.

⁶² *WR*, 1863, 844.

⁶³ Cumming, *Signs of the Times: The Moslem and his End: The Christian and his Hope* (1854) (hereafter *SOT*), pt ii, 31-2.

⁶⁴ Cumming, *God in History* (1849), 27; *SOT*, ii, 144.

land''.⁶⁵ The evidence for God's intervention was to be seen in all creation and especially in his dealings with the human race which was the crown of creation and which had special gifts making it capable of responding to the commands of the Creator. However, instead of response there had been rebellion by which God was both alienated and grieved, but such was his love that he sent Jesus Christ in whom that love was embodied and proved, and by whose death upon the Cross the barrier of sin was broken down and through whom human beings were drawn back to new life and new obedience.

Jesus Christ achieved what he did because he was who he was. This was set forth in the doctrine of the Trinity. Though this word was not in the Bible it was a word which provided the key to understanding what was in the Bible. This doctrine was not an easy doctrine but "it is a truth as luminous as our vision can bear, and as largely so as our comprehension can grasp. . . . We can easily see what it is, but not how it is". That is, said Cumming, how it should be, for there must be mystery in God.⁶⁶ Christ's achievement on the Cross and in the Resurrection was vital for our salvation; he provided what was needed for our redemption: "He is our propitiation, our priest, our sacrifice, our altar, our atonement". Cumming also used the idea of substitution: "He substituted himself, the just in the room of the unjust".⁶⁷ Yet Cumming was clearly influenced by MacLeod Campbell and he never spoke of Christ placating an angry Father: "this atonement was not made to make God love those whom he otherwise hated".

The atonement was offered, not to create in God a love that was not, but to be the exponent and evidence to us of a love that was and is, and it is not true that God so hated us that Christ, to intercept his wrath, interposed to save us; but he so loved us that he gave, as an expression of that love, Christ to die for us.⁶⁸

This stress upon Christ's unique work did not mean that Cumming had no place for evidence of God's working outside the Christian revelation. There were among the heathen refractions, distorted indeed, but nevertheless genuine, of God's work as Redeemer, Restorer and Revealer. Even Greek statuary was the attempt to "make visible him of whom they had some dim and distant recollection".⁶⁹ The heart of man is not a paradise, but neither is it a pandemonium.⁷⁰ In the heart of man are traces of the

⁶⁵ Cumming, *Prophetic Studies* (Lectures on the Book of Daniel, 1850), 70, 71.

⁶⁶ *Is Christianity from God?*, 224-5.

⁶⁷ *CT*, 359.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 367; also *Is Christianity from God?*, 231; *Christ our Passover* (1854), 47, 66; *OD*, i, 75.

⁶⁹ *SOT*, ii, 78-79.

⁷⁰ Cumming, *Voices of the Dead* (1853), 259.

departed glory and the most degraded heart still hears “voices of deity”: “Man’s conscience tells us from its solemn oracle that there is a God”.⁷¹

Cumming had also a profound sacramental doctrine. Though he repudiated any doctrine of baptismal regeneration which taught that the performance of the sacrament automatically made the baptised person a child of God, he defended baptism as an ordained means of grace and its application to children as a practice with biblical warrant and as a mark of admission to the visible Church.⁷²

In dealing with the Lord’s Supper he neither accepted the bareness of Socinian memorialism nor approved the elaboration of the few words of institution in the New Testament to justify the doctrine of transubstantiation as set forth in the many pages of the Roman Missal.⁷³ The New Testament command that all should drink from the Cup had been an anticipatory condemnation of the abuse of withholding the cup from the laity. Moreover, New Testament parallels should have blocked any literal reading of the words, “This is my body”.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Cumming deplored the way in which, in reaction to medieval abuses, many had been driven to think of the sacrament as an awesome ceremony to be infrequently observed, and from which apprehensive sinners felt they had to absent themselves.⁷⁵ The remedy for such souls was not to be found in absence but in a penitent presence when Christ’s death was shown forth as the most important moment in human history and as the complete offering which would continue to be shown forth “till he come”.⁷⁶

Cumming was also curiously interested in the state of the souls of the blessed departed. He had no quarrel with the teaching common in the Reformed tradition that the souls of believers at death immediately pass into heaven and are cleansed of all the distortions of earthly life. Edward Irving, for example, had been a devoted believer in Christ and had begun his ministry like “some warship with streaming pennants and with majestic way” and he had been heard by “the crowns and coronets of the world, but his lofty intellect and enthusiastic and unscriptural notions had broken the bands of prudence and he had been deposed from the office of the holy ministry, but he was now in heaven and his grievous

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷² Cumming, *The Baptismal Font, or a Short Exposition of the Nature and Obligations of Christian Baptism* (1845), 23, 25, 30. This booklet was dedicated to the Countess of Ducie, another supporter of Cumming’s schools. Her husband was a charity commissioner and a supporter of the Evangelical Alliance.

⁷³ *CT*, 7, 41.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. iv.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-66, 82.

misapprehensions are for ever done away".⁷⁷ Cumming went on to consider the state of the blessed dead and he said it was probable they remembered with intense sharpness all the events of their life here; they still knew much about us, "more than we know of them". We are compassed about by the blessed dead, and they and "the visible communion of professing Christians upon earth" are the Church of Christ.⁷⁸ The partition separating the Church above from the Church below may be "so thin that the sensitive ears of the blessed can hear the sighs, the groans, the praises, the sorrows, the fears, the doubts of those that are fighting in this battle-field below".⁷⁹ Cumming rejected any doctrine claiming we could get in touch with them and he attacked spiritualism as one of the false beliefs of his time.⁸⁰

Cumming's ministry was spread over years of turmoil in historical, scientific and biblical studies, and in national, international and ecclesiastical affairs. The French Revolution had shaken the traditional European framework. The "scorching lava" of that revolution had poured over Europe, and Robespierre and his "troops of fiends" had ridden upon its fiery surges and it had reached its high mark in Napoleon for whom Cumming could not restrain a measure of admiration: "his ambition prescribed his march, his artillery and rolling musketry mowed down battalions as does the scythe of the mower the green grass of the field; his words were battles, his battles were victories, and his presence kindled the hearts of raw recruits into burning heroism and made veteran warriors feel they were young again".⁸¹ Europe had received further shocks in 1848, "the year of Marx and Revolutions", as Cumming called it.⁸² British prestige was shaken by the Indian mutiny and by the perennial unrest in Ireland. British affairs were remodelled by the ending of the Test Act in 1828, by Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and by the Reform Act of 1832. The death of the Duke of Wellington in 1852 seemed to be the end of an era.⁸³ Cumming made his views on all these issues known in sermons, lectures and books which had a wide circulation.

He defended the literal and historical accuracy of the records in the Bible and claimed that God, though not crushing the individuality of the writers, had directed the very words he intended

⁷⁷ *OD*, i, 140-44.

⁷⁸ *MR*, 434-6, also see 19, 46-7.

⁷⁹ *BR*, 197.

⁸⁰ Cumming, *The Great Tribulation coming upon the Earth* (1860) (hereafter *GT*), 62. This work ran into the 11,000th and was mocked by *Punch* as the Great Tribulation which is Cumming upon the Earth: Cameron, *op. cit.*, 147. See also *BR*, 197.

⁸¹ *The Age we live in*, 321.

⁸² *GT*, iv; *SOT*, i, 52; *God in History*, 125; *War and its issues* (1855), 66; see also *LEF*.

⁸³ Cumming, *War and its Issues*, 68.

to be in the Bible and had so preserved the text that the variations between scores of manuscripts were of negligible significance. Nothing had come to light which justified the proposal to provide a revision of the Authorised Version which had itself almost a second inspiration and had become the Bible for English-speaking people and across all denominations. This revered position ought not to be disturbed for the sake of accuracy on points of minimal importance.⁸⁴ Source criticism and the attempt to discern different strands of tradition in the Bible were brushed aside by Cumming and he wrote a vigorous tract against Colenso.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, he was aware of the awkward questions which had to be faced. There were passages where actions and commands were attributed to God and which Cumming admitted were hard to harmonize with justice, not to mention mercy, but Cumming assured his readers that with fuller knowledge of the divine plans they would be seen to have been justifiable. In dealing with the two New Testament genealogies of Jesus with their differing number of generations and their lineage coming to Joseph rather than Mary, he held they could be harmonized by taking Matthew's list as the genealogy of Joseph, and Luke's as that of Mary, but in the Lucan list son would have to be read as son-in-law!⁸⁶

Cumming was keenly interested in discoveries about the earth and the universe and he was aware that light was arriving from the stars after a journey of many years, and more light would likely come from yet undiscovered stars.⁸⁷ He was aware that fossil remains upon earth gave evidence of life far beyond the reputed 6,000 years since creation. So, like many apologists, he held that in Genesis 1 the necessary time-span was allowed for in the statement that the Spirit of God moved upon the waters; this gave time for a series of eras and the present era was in his view, as we shall see, nearing its end.⁸⁸ He was sufficiently satisfied with this scenario that he could confidently declare that there was no need for religious people to "be afraid, as they used to be, of the discoveries of science" or to fear that "the hammer of the geologist should break the Rock of Ages."⁸⁹

Cumming also entered deeply into the controversy with the Church of Rome. He considered the Emancipation Act to have been an untimely concession but he thought that, having been passed, it could not and ought not to be undone; he also defended the right of Roman Catholics to hold and practise their religion under the protection of the law but he urged Protestants to be

⁸⁴ *Is Christianity from God?*, chh. vii, viii.

⁸⁵ *WR*, 1863, 602.

⁸⁶ *Is Christianity from God?*, chh. viii, ix.

⁸⁷ *Voices of the Dead*, 14.

⁸⁸ *Is Christianity from God?*, chh. i-iv.

⁸⁹ *The Age we live in*, 330.

vigilant in defence of liberty and to be ready to give an account of their own position. He also stressed the duty of charitable behaviour towards all people and he said he would go to the aid of Cardinal Wiseman if he were to be attacked upon the street by a London mob, for, though opposed to his principles, "I must not forget that I am a man and whatever is human commands my sympathy, and still less that I am a Christian, bound to sympathize with suffering as such".⁹⁰ There were also those in the Roman Catholic Church who gave many signs of being truly Christian. Cumming noted Luther's debt to Staupitz "who was in Rome, but not of it",⁹¹ and he said he had met Roman Catholic priests and people in Paris and even in London whose hearts, "in spite of the enveloping superstition", had been touched and transformed by the power and majesty of God's truth: "When we speak severely of the system we never mean to imply that there are no Christians there: God forbid!".⁹²

Cumming declared himself ready to hold public debate with Roman Catholics, preferably priests, because if he debated with laymen the priests were likely to say the laity were unauthorised defenders of the faith. However, he was persuaded to hold a debate in Hammersmith with Daniel French, a barrister-at-law and well versed in the controversial issues. The debate took place over 11 two-hour sessions in April and May 1839 and covered the issues of transubstantiation, the sacrifice of the Mass, the invocation of saints and angels, purgatory, and the rule of faith.⁹³ Both speakers produced a fusillade of biblical expositions, quotations from the Fathers and the Reformers, and decisions of Councils. Both claimed they had been victorious in the debate; both addressed each other as "my learned friend" but this was a sweetener for many a barbed word. French said that Cumming with his mellifluous tongue had claimed to be totally exempt from anything like bitter feeling towards the Roman Catholics but had gone on to say he wished "to blast our dark and apostate system with spiritual weapons"; French then said that he would like to blast with equal eagerness "that whole system of sacrilegious pollution and roaring bellowing wide-yawning fanaticism which passes under the name of Scottish Calvinism".⁹⁴ Cumming retorted that he would not be intimidated and he likened himself to the Highland piper who was captured at Waterloo and taken before Napoleon who ordered him to play one of his national airs and he did so; he was then commanded to play a pibroch and he did so; he was then ordered to

⁹⁰ *SOT*, i, 103; *OD*, 288; *BR*, 329.

⁹¹ Cumming, *The Finger of God* (1853), 57; *Voices of the Dead*, 159.

⁹² *MR*, 222-3.

⁹³ *The Hammersmith Protestant Discussion: An Authentic Report* (new edn., 1848).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

play an advance and he did so; he was ordered to play a charge and he did so; and then Napoleon who was much pleased with the minstrel and his music, said, "Now then play retreat and I shall have done". "No", said the piper, "I never learned to play a retreat".⁹⁵

A shorthand writer prepared a full account of the debate which was published in a 680-page book; the first printing of 2,000 was quickly sold out and a new printing was ordered. The publisher's blurb said that while French had "occasionally displayed a lamentable want of temper" Cumming had kept perfect control of himself and his language. The Protestants of Hammersmith presented Cumming with a sumptuous polyglot edition of the Bible and the Crown Court people gave him a complete edition of the Fathers and a silver plate worth £250.⁹⁶

A further storm was raised when a Roman Catholic hierarchy was established in Britain in 1850 to the accompaniment of flamboyant claims by Wiseman. Cumming gave a public lecture in the Hanover Rooms which were filled three hours before the lecture began. "Many ladies fainted and had to be removed. Many could not gain admission; reports said hundreds had to be turned away."⁹⁷

A further cause of offence to Cumming was the beatification in 1864 of Margaret Mary Alacoque who had lived in France in the seventeenth century and who, after being bed-ridden for many years, entered a convent at Paray-le-Monial in 1671 and then claimed to have had several revelations of the sacred heart and to have had guidance as to forms of devotions to be associated therewith. Her superiors said her claims were based on delusions but her story persisted and a form of devotion was permitted in 1765. After the beatification, pilgrimages to Paray-le-Monial became popular. Cumming delivered several fiery denunciations of her story which he called silly and ludicrous.⁹⁸

A further inflammation of the controversy with Rome occurred with the calling of the Vatican Council in 1870 with the item of papal infallibility on its agenda. Cumming claimed that if the council was to be, as it claimed to be, an oecumenical council all sections of the Catholic Church should be heard and he wrote to Cardinal Manning claiming the right to attend and to speak. He said that he would show that the Churches of English and Scottish Christendom, despite their lack of uniformity, had a unity in the great truths of the Gospel and that the Church of Rome had a uniformity without unity.⁹⁹ Manning referred the matter to the Pope, Pius IX, and he replied in chilling terms; he said that Christ

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁶ *WR*, 16 July, 1881, 692.

⁹⁷ *In Memoriam*, 59; see above, 60.

⁹⁸ *WR*, 1872, 893, 952.

⁹⁹ *WR*, 1867, 587, 803.

had given the Church authority to teach and it infallibly decided questions concerning dogma and morals, and the Church could not give a platform in the council to those whose errors had already been condemned by the Church. The one Church was the Church of Rome, built upon Peter, and it had preserved inviolate the deposit of faith and had the commission to deliver it to all peoples. All that the Church of Rome can offer to non-Catholics was the opportunity to return home from "a state in which they cannot be sure of their salvation" and the Church would "rejoice that our children who were dead had come to life again and that they who were lost have been found".¹⁰⁰ A press observer remarked that Cumming's "serpentine craft" had extracted a clear statement from the Pope which would leave no doubt about his position.¹⁰¹

In an age of controversy, Cumming had high repute as a protestant champion and as early as 1851 a public meeting was held at which he was presented with 1,000 guineas and a silver salver valued at 300 guineas. Tributes were paid to his leadership in the controversy with Rome and among the subscribers to the presentation was the Duke of Norfolk who had recently become a Protestant; it was rumoured that a sermon by Cumming had much influenced the decision of the Duke who often attended services in Crown Court.¹⁰²

Parallel with his rejection of Roman Catholic claims, Cumming had, at least in the early years of his ministry, a remarkable confidence in the prospects of the time. He rejoiced in the widespread spirit of enquiry; people were no longer the unquestioning recipients of traditional wisdom or of antiquated theories: "the age summons all things to trial and all things hear and rush to the grand assize". There was also a flow of inventions which were changing human life; railroads were like "the magician's rod" speeding travellers on their way; the electric telegraph was "a wire of wonders" and speeches made at 10 p.m. were in the papers on the breakfast table next morning.¹⁰³ Cumming also held that there was an appreciation of the things of the mind which had not marked earlier times: Locke had been banished from Oxford for his views; Selden had been sent to the Tower, and Milton got only £5 for the manuscript of *Paradise Lost*, but now writers such as Scott, Byron and Dickens reaped fortunes; genius could now make its way to the top.¹⁰⁴ There was also an increasing respect for life; slaves had been liberated,

¹⁰⁰ *WR*, 1867, 919-20. Cumming held that neither threats nor blandishments would make England a province, and London a proconsulate of the Vatican. See also *War and its Issues*, 58-9, 67; *SOT*, ii, 48; *Prophetic Studies*, 259.

¹⁰¹ *WR*, 1867, 924.

¹⁰² *In Memoriam*, 59; see above, 60.

¹⁰³ *The Age we live in*, 329.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

workers were being better treated, and there was a growing aversion to war; "it is only when a nation's mind has no thoughts to fill it that the nation's forces go forth to battle"; "a yard measure is now more useful than a Damascus blade".¹⁰⁵

Somewhat strangely for a preacher so strong in asserting the authority of scripture, Cumming asserted that bombastic dogmatic flourishes, even if uttered by a bishop, could not settle doctrinal issues; the only completely convincing authority was the divine truth which found an echo in the conscience and this would be heard "though it should be enunciated from a tub".¹⁰⁶ This tension was common in Cumming's thought and indeed in the thought of many preachers of his day. There were also growing signs that his confident hopes for the future were being infiltrated by sombre apprehensions. He could not forget the grinding toil and poverty which shut millions off from the benefits of the new age, and the peace of Europe was being threatened by the piling up of arms.¹⁰⁷

Part of his confidence about the future was based on his conviction that the divine providence was at work in the affairs of Britain. He had high hopes that the young Queen Victoria would set a new tone to the life of the nation; he hoped she would not patronize "the midnight revelry of the opera, the injurious stimulants of the theatre and the disregard of religion" and that she would not seek advice from "the fawning parasite or the refined debauchee".¹⁰⁸ She rose steadily in his esteem and he praised the influence of Prince Albert who had brought "a fairy palace" to birth in the city of London.¹⁰⁹ The Exhibition had displayed the achievements of the Empire. Britain was the barometer of commerce, the market of the earth.¹¹⁰

At this moment her flag waves in every land, her ships drop anchor on every strand, the sound of her conquering drum reverberates on every quarter of the globe, the boom of her cannon is the signal to the slave that he shall be free, and to the oppressed that he shall be delivered.¹¹¹

Cumming even ventured to suggest that the whirring wings mentioned in Isaiah 18 were the sails of British trading fleets, and the swift beasts of Isaiah 66 were the railway trains so swift that the journey from London to Edinburgh could be done in one day.¹¹² He thought that England could be identified with the biblical Tarshish.¹¹³ While he refused to believe that England had immunity

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 333-4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 339-40.

¹⁰⁸ *OD*, 108, 111.

¹⁰⁹ *War and its Issues*, 68.

¹¹⁰ *The Age we live in*, 327.

¹¹¹ *The Finger of God*, 61.

¹¹² *WR*, 1862, 474.

¹¹³ *WR*, 1871, 79.

from the decay which overhung most empires, he held that even if her empire perished it would perish with honour. While European nations struggled for liberty, equality and fraternity, these were realities in England. The Queen could not enter the humblest cottage without the occupant's permission; also, "the blackest child of Africa who shows a sanctified heart would be as welcome to take the Lord's Supper in any cathedral, church or chapel as the greatest noble or the richest man". The son of a draper was now the Archbishop of York.¹¹⁴ The way upwards was open to those able to rise, though Cumming did express disappointment with some who had risen into parliament and whose coarse and turbulent shouting did not give "a high, a solemn, a respectful impression of its soberness, of its greatness, of its authority".¹¹⁵

Finally, if there was one issue more than another which brought Cumming to public notice or even notoriety it was his teaching on Christ's Second Coming which he believed to be imminent. This belief he derived from his study of the Bible and his reading of the signs of the times in his own day. He believed God had wrapped up the pattern of future events in the Bible, especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation. There was a large public which shared this belief and who flocked to hear his sermons and lectures on the subject.

He assumed that the seven days of the Creation story in Genesis were anticipations of seven millenia of the present era which began about 4,000 years before Christ; the story of the present era was therefore in its sixth millenium which was drawing to a close in a climax when apostasy and violence were rampant; "there is not a green field in Europe that is not a soldier's sepulchre".¹¹⁶ This was leading up to the seventh millenium which would be inaugurated by the advent of Christ who would establish peace and righteousness upon earth; misunderstandings would be cleared up and crime would cease. Cumming rejected the idea that the millenium would be a preparation for the coming of Christ; it was only Christ's advent which could bring a millenium into this tarnished earth. Some held that the closing stages of the final millenium would be marked by a brief last fling by Satan before his final defeat and it was held that such an outbreak could not take place if Christ had already come. Cumming admitted there was a problem here but he thought that such a fling could be allowed by Christ so as to highlight the completeness of Satan's final doom.¹¹⁷

The beginning of the final millenium and the Advent of Christ would also see the resurrection of those already dead, though Cumming is not always clear as to whether all the dead would rise,

¹¹⁴ *LEF*, 48.

¹¹⁵ *War and its Issues*, 72.

¹¹⁶ *MR*, 187.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32, 39, 122; *SOT*, ii, 38.

or only the bodies of the blessed dead, the others being raised at the end of the seventh millenium for their final condemnation. The dominant idea seems to be that only the blessed will be raised at the start of the final millenium.¹¹⁸ All deformities and signs of age would be removed and there would be no grey hairs and no crow's feet, but all the distinguishing mannerisms would be retained.¹¹⁹

In an attempt to mark out the timetable of events, Cumming said Daniel had a reference to a period of 2,300 years which would pass before the restoration of Jerusalem took place. Cumming calculated this from 433 B.C., an important year in the time of Nehemiah when the Temple was cleansed. This brought him to 1867. There was also a reference in Daniel to 42 months which spanned 1,260 days and each day could be taken as a year. If this was calculated from A.D. 607 when the Emperor Phocas constituted Pope Boniface II as the universal head of the universal church this would also bring the date to 1867 when papal power would reach its end. The papacy might show signs of life but these would be the dreadful writhings of a doomed authority. Moreover, in Daniel there were forecasts about the drying up of the Euphrates and Cumming saw this as a portent of the crumbling of Islam: "soon the Crescent will wane and the Cross emerge in greater glory".¹²⁰ In another reckoning, Cumming saw the decisions of Justinian giving temporal power to the papacy in A.D. 532 as a key point in history from which the 1,260 years reached to 1792, the time of the French Revolution when the papal powers began to be pruned.¹²¹

Cumming saw in his own day what seemed to him clear signs of the decline of Islam, the cracking of the papacy, and the massing of nations for a battle of Armageddon. All this was the pouring out of the seventh vial foretold in the Book of Revelation; he listed the horrors of the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the war with China, commotion in France, unrest in Italy, and signs of a sickness unto death in Turkey.¹²² The advances of science had led to the massing of armaments which could cause "shocks of armies as never before equalled in the history of the world."¹²³

The Crimean War was difficult to fit into Cumming's scenario because here Britain was bolstering up a power which in Cumming's eyes was doomed, but he felt the policy could be defended as a justifiable police action to prevent Europe being "clothed in the sackcloth of Russian slavery".¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ MR, 126-7.

¹¹⁹ MR, 115; also see Cumming, *The Tent and the Altar, or Sketches from Patriarchal Life* (1854), 361.

¹²⁰ GT, 34, 35, 241, 242, 245, 247; *Finger of God*, 78; SOT, i, 5-8; BR, 23.

¹²¹ BR, 359.

¹²² GT, iv, 5, 42, 43.

¹²³ GT, ix, BR, 419-427.

¹²⁴ *War and its Issues*, 13-14, 150.

A particular sign of God's ripening purpose was discernible in the story of the Jewish people. Great people as they were, they had failed to appreciate their privileges and had rejected the Christ, and God had cast them off and dispersed them to the ends of the earth, but they were still his people and would be gathered together in his time. "The Jews were the only nation upon earth for whom God selected and consecrated a land to be a possession for ever".¹²⁵ Unlike many other dispersed peoples they had maintained their identity and were never absorbed into the mass with others. Compared with them England's noblest nobles were but of yesterday.¹²⁶ They had been treated barbarously by Christian nations, and some had tried to justify that treatment on the ground that God had put a curse upon them, but the Christians' duty was to do to others as they would be done by, and Christians had a duty to treat the Jews with all due consideration and not to pretend to have a commission to help God to fulfil his doom upon the Jews. Jews were found everywhere; they had no great landed estates; their property was floating; their capital was in their purses, as though they were ready as soon as the signal came to make for Jerusalem which the Mohammedans occupied as servants keeping the house aired for the return of the rightful owner.¹²⁷ The Jews were showing a new interest in Palestine and Sir Moses Montefiore had asked the Sultan to allow Jews to settle in Palestine. In the millennium a special honour would be accorded to Jerusalem which would be "the glorious chancel of the cathedral of the earth".¹²⁸

If there were signs of Jewish resurgence, Cumming also discerned signs of renewed vigour in the Christian world. The British and Foreign Bible Society was expanding, and the work of the Church Missionary Society, the Baptist Missionary Society, and the London Missionary Society was spreading and was being supported with increasing generosity. These societies, and indeed the Churches, had a new sense of the 99 principles on which they agreed and which overshadowed the one crotchet on which they disagreed.¹²⁹ The bitterness of sectarianism was breaking up and there were Christians among Episcopalians, Independents, Presbyterians, and even Roman Catholics. Denominations were apt to claim that they had a monopoly of grace but divisions were usually over "the misty margins" rather than over central themes. The passing of such exclusiveness was a sign that the millennium was near and was a welcome balance to the great darkness of the world. Cumming also saw a sign of hope in the rise of the revival in 1859 in the United States of America and in Ulster, but he surely

¹²⁵ *MR*, 341.

¹²⁶ *GT*, 2, 122.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 24, 25; *MR*, 341.

¹²⁸ *WR*, 1876, 30; *MR*, 20.

¹²⁹ *GT*, 29-30; *SOT*, i, 31.

fled from reality when he said Ireland would be wholly Protestant in the course of a very few years.¹³⁰ It is symptomatic of his attachment to the dignified tradition to be found in the Established Churches that while welcoming the Revival of 1859 he expressed disapproval of the tasteless and indiscreet behaviour of evangelists whom he called "the rough instruments" God was using to bring in his Kingdom.¹³¹

Cumming's forecasts evoked wide interest or rather satisfied an interest which was already there among large numbers of people who held that the Bible, even its most cryptic sections, had a message which it was vitally important to discern and heed. There was also criticism; a reviewer in the *Free Church Magazine* said that Cumming's books on the imminent end of the age were "a kind of stalking-horse" to an easy popularity with "a numerous auditory" who were eager to hear such speculations and ready to swallow his wayward "accommodation of Scripture to a theory".¹³² Moreover, there was always the shadow of the obduracy of events which did not unroll as he expected. Anticipated dates would pass without incident and Cumming, like many other similar theorists, would try to retrieve his reputation by revised schemes and unconvincing apologies. He was even accused of not believing his own predictions and that at the very time he was predicting the imminent end of the era he was negotiating the purchase of a house and complaining that he could not get a twenty-year lease. Cumming was quite unabashed by this criticism and said that if the date of the Second Advent were known beyond a peradventure there would be no cause for letting things run out of hand as though it was not worth keeping things going. God's precepts stood and he expected his servants to be working and watching whenever he came. Therefore, he claimed, he had every right to make provision for his family. He hoped to be found busy at his work: "the post of duty is always the place of safety before God and in the sight of all mankind".¹³³ *The Daily Telegraph* continued the aspersions about Cumming's sincerity by demanding to know how many sacks of coal were in his cellar.¹³⁴

Cumming's forecasts continued to lose their power as they failed to materialize; his forecasts for 1867 had been so reiterated and confident that its passing had a particularly heavy impact on his reputation and Lord Frederick Hamilton suggests that this led to the decline of his influence in the seventies. However, there was also a failing of his natural powers. His voice became weaker and

¹³⁰ *GT*, 38-105; *OD*, 82; *SOT*, i, 66; *MR*, 222-3; *The Tent and the Altar*, 113-124; *The Finger of God*, 89, 161.

¹³¹ *MR*, 4, 29.

¹³² *Free Church Magazine*, 1859, 304.

¹³³ *GT*, 250-1.

¹³⁴ *WR*, 1870, 448; 1877, 175; 1878, 1167.

his increasing short-sightedness limited his power as a preacher, though it was noted that he still drew many young men to Crown Court Church. In June 1879, he was seriously ill and had gone to the Continent. In July he was so frail that he decided to retire. The Church's depleted membership was in great perplexity about the future. Cumming had done so much for the Church that he could not easily be allowed to retire without a decent pension, but if the members took on this responsibility they could not meet the stipend of a new minister. The elders issued an appeal for £4,000 to provide an annuity of £500.¹³⁵ Eventually enough was raised to provide an annuity of £300.¹³⁶

The Rev. J. S. Forsyth of Holloway Scotch Church preached in Crown Court on a Sunday in August 1879 and declared the pulpit vacant. He said that Cumming's ministry had been of "transcendent good to the Church of Christ" and that he had been "one of mankind's greatest benefactors".¹³⁷ Even allowing for eulogistic latitude, there was no doubt that on balance he had exercised a notable ministry.

His declining strength received a further shock in September when his wife died after a marriage of over 45 years. She had suffered much from asthma.¹³⁸ Cumming himself died on 5 July 1881 aged 74. His fame had waned before his retirement, and two years in retirement had taken him further out of the public eye and his funeral to Kensal Green Cemetery was strictly private and attended by a small group of mourners.¹³⁹ He has been remembered, wherever he has been remembered, as a prickly ecclesiastic or as a fanciful millenarian, but let him also be remembered as a man of vision who said he longed for the day when the "miserable shibboleths which distract Christendom would disappear as smoke and there would be no Jesuits, no Franciscans, no Tractarians, no Churchmen, no Dissenters, but only out-and-out Christians".¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ *WR*, 1879, 663.

¹³⁶ *WR*, 1879, 711, 1045.

¹³⁷ *WR*, 1879, 830.

¹³⁸ *WR*, 1879, 879.

¹³⁹ *WR*, 1881, 692.

¹⁴⁰ *SOT*, i, 66; *LEF*, 120-3.

